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# The Men Who Stopped the Mongols

Article · September 2007

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The Mamluks are a study in contradictions. They were slave-soldiers imported as boys from beyond the lands of Islam who became lords of Egypt and saved the Muslim world from the Mongol rage. They also ultimately destroyed the Crusader kingdom of Outremer and were the greatest cavalrymen of the Middle Ages reaching near-perfection in their skill with the bow, lance and sword. The Sultanate the Mamluks created fought many foes throughout its lifetime [1250-1517] but it is for their defeat of the Mongols in Syria that they should chiefly be remembered. Mongol forces that had bludgeoned their way down through China, dismembered the eastern Islamic Empire, placed Russia under a yoke and annihilated the cream of eastern European chivalry at the battles of Liegnitz and Sajo in 1241 were finally halted by men who were decidedly similar to themselves.

The Mamluk Sultanate's origins can be found in the mass buying of Turkish boys by al-Salih Ayyub, the Sultan of Egypt and grand-nephew of Saladin, as recruits for his elite slave-soldier regiments and they came to power following their defeat of one of the largest Crusader armies ever to be led to the Middle East in 1250 at al-Mansura just south of Cairo. A junior emir named Baybars led the Muslim counter attack against the Crusaders that led to their defeat. He then murdered the son of al-Salih who had died during the early stages of the Crusade. Chaos however ensued for nearly ten years after Baybars's regicide and the internecine fighting within the new Sultanate even led to Baybars himself fleeing Cairo with a few hundred of his close comrades. He only returned in 1260 as the Mamluks at this point had unity pushed upon them by the Mongols who had now turned their full attention to the reduction of the Middle East. The Great Khan Mongke's brother Hulegu was sent west in 1253 to destroy both the Assassin sect of Persia and the Caliphate of Baghdad. Both tasks were achieved by 1259 and Iran was devastated. The Caliph was either kicked to death after having been rolled in a carpet or starved to death in a tower among his treasure – accounts differ. The Mongols then moved north and accepted the subjugation of Armenia and Georgia before moving into Syria and taking Aleppo bloodily and Damascus bloodlessly in January 1260.

Now Hulegu sent envoys to Kutuz, the Mamluk emir who had risen to the top of the pile in Cairo to become Sultan, demanding his surrender. Kutuz killed the envoys, cutting

them in half in the horse market, and placed their heads on the gates of the city. Kutuz's action, at first glance, seems reckless, he was the Sultan of a politically feeble and unstable dynasty but it may be that he felt he really had no choice but to face up to Hulegu. Any kind of treaty that fell short of total submission to the Mongols was impossible.

Hulegu's letter to him carried the following explicit message:

*Say to Egypt, Hulegu has come,  
With swords unsheathed and sharp.  
The mightiest of her children will become humble,  
He will send their children to join the aged.*

It was a common saying in Egypt that one Mamluk was worth 1,000 ordinary soldiers but Hulegu was coming with 300,000 men and against this stood only the army of Egypt, much of which was non-Mamluk. Baybars's return with his refugee Mamluks under an oath of safety from Kutuz was therefore vital but even more important was that Hulegu had retired from Syria with a large part of his forces. Mongke, the Great Khan who had sent Hulegu to the west, had died and Hulegu's brothers Qubilai and Ariq Boke were prepared to undertake war on each other for the succession. Hulegu was viewed by the Ariq Boke faction as pro-Qubilai whilst Ariq Boke was backed by the Mongols of Russia, the Golden Horde. What would really have concerned Hulegu was that the Horde's forces lay directly to his north in the Caucasus region and there had already been friction between Hulegu and Berke Khan of the Horde over rights of conquest in Persia. He therefore had to withdraw to northwest Iran to be in a good position to meet any invasion from Russia. For the Mamluks he was far enough away to give them at least a chance against the forces that he had left behind under Kit Buqa, one of his most trusted lieutenants, to mop up Syria. In the spring of 1260 Kit Buqa sent detachments south to be able to watch developments in Egypt. This action also effectively surrounded the Crusader kingdoms on the coast.

On 26 July 1260 Kutuz left Cairo with his army of Mamluks and refugee soldiers from all over the old Islamic empire. He had managed to scrape together about 20,000 men. He

decided to meet the Mongols in Syria rather than to wait for them in Egypt as while the Mongol numbers in Syria were reduced at this moment this could change quickly. Also fear was already creeping into the army and it was only when he made his preparations to leave and said, 'I am going to fight the Mongols alone', that they followed him out of Cairo's citadel.

The Mamluks marched north along the Syrian coast in order to then move inland sharply to cut the Mongol lines of communication if Kit Buqa should decide to try to strike south towards Egypt. The army therefore had to march through Crusader lands and Kutuz sent an embassy to the Franks of Acre to ensure safe passage for his forces through their kingdom. This was granted and it is perhaps a little surprising that the Franks chose their 'auld enemy' the Muslims over the Mongols, but perhaps they felt that there was really no other choice. The large Mamluk army was already in the Frankish zone- they were certainly unwelcome guests, but were the Mongols really anymore welcome? Kit Buqa's forceful occupation of Syria made it obvious that the region was, to the Mongols, just another colony to be pacified without reference to any of its inhabitants.

Word came that Kit Buqa was moving south and had encamped on the plain of Ayn Jalut, the Spring of Goliath, at the foot of Mount Gilboa. His army probably numbered somewhere around 12,000 men, but a sizeable portion of it was not Mongol – he was employing Georgian and Armenians and troopers from the now dissolved armies of north Syria. Kutuz arrived at Ayn Jalut shortly after the Mongols. Baybars, however, had gone ahead again with a detached vanguard. From the Hill of Moreh he spied the Mongols' position in the valley below and sent word to Kutuz. Baybars also destroyed a Mongol reconnaissance unit, which might explain Kit Buqa's subsequent failure to realise the size of the Mamluk army just prior to the battle.

The battle proper began on 3 September. The Mongols took up position on the plain with their line running north to south across the valley. The Syrian troops were positioned on the extreme left wing ready to form the second assault rather than the first. The Mongol right very quickly defeated the Mamluk left under Baybars but then they found themselves under heavy assault by the troopers of Kutuz's bodyguard. Kutuz led his men into the fray in person and this counter-attack sent the Mongol right into disorder. Perhaps a feigned retreat was being used here by the Mamluks – the Qipchaq Turks knew

just as well as the Mongols how to use provocation to draw the enemy on. Kit Buqa, however, was far from beaten and he was nearly able, within only a short time, to turn the battle around again. Again, Kutuz's intervention was crucial, he threw off his helmet so that his troops could see him clearly and led a frontal charge as he called out the battle cry, 'Oh Islam! Allah! Help your servant Kutuz!' This sent the Mongols into disarray, and then the Syrians of Homs chose this most inconvenient moment to desert them.

The bloody battle lasted from dawn until midday and changed from combat to slaughter. The Mamluks set fire to reed beds near the small river that runs through the valley to flush out Mongols who were hiding in them and the debacle was completed by the death of Kit Buqa. The Mongols lost a sizeable portion of their army and Damascus, Hama and Aleppo were deserted by their Mongol garrisons. Baybars chased the Mongols up through the north of Syria and defeated a contingent of two thousand Mongol troopers that Hulegu had belatedly sent to Kit Buqa.

The importance of the battle cannot be overstated. It is true that the Mamluks engaged only a small proportion of Hulegu's forces and that events far in the east had hampered the Mongols' efforts in Syria just as the death of Ogedei Khan had distracted them from further conquests in Europe after their defeat of the Poles and Teutonic Knights in 1241. It is also true that the Mongols would come again, several times, into Syria but Ayn Jalut stopped a run of Mongol success and it gave the Mamluks a degree of belief. It had seemed before the battle that the age of Islam was at an end. The Mongol destruction of the Caliphate and their wholesale slaughter of cities gave the appearance of a direct assault on Muslims.

In terms of how the battle was won, the desertion of the Syrians was very significant. Classic Mongol battle plans used wings made up of auxiliaries late in the battle after the enemy had been engaged by the Mongol troops. A first wave of Mongol troops would attack the enemy with volleys of arrows and then turn before close contact was made. They would then ride to the rear between the flank forces and the next wave of the army's centre, which moved forward to meet an enemy that was now disordered from the initial shock of attack and from pursuit of the retreating first wave. This first wave would now be rearming itself with arrows in the army's rear and readying itself to re-enter the fight. The wings, thanks to the loss of cohesion in the enemy force, were now able to

mount flank attacks that pushed past the enemy's rear and would at the battle's conclusion lead to encirclement. The re-supplied first wave either added to the final destruction of the opposing army or if resistance was proving stubborn it could form a third wave behind which the second detachment could retire for rearming. The waves, could, in theory, be mounted again and again until the enemy was degraded enough to allow encirclement. What went wrong for the Mongols at Ayn Jalut was that their allies on the flank deserted them at a key juncture and that they were outclassed by the Mamluks.

A Mamluk, Sarim, who fought with the Syrians of Homs states in his account of the battle that their desertion was pre-arranged secretly the night before the battle. Sarim also claims he was asked by Kit Buqa and to identify each of the Mamluk banners as they came into view. Many later pro-Mongol sources describe a Mamluk ambush but Sarim's testimony makes such a claim impossible. It seems rather that Baybars's retreat drew the Mongols in and then Kutuz crashed into their flank. There was no ambush, just superior strategy.

Even with the desertion Kit Buqa could, ordinarily, have won the battle. What was more significant was that his opponents were highly skilled mounted archers. The Mamluks were able to outdo the Mongols' archery assault in rate of fire, accuracy and power. The Mongols' first charge would have been more damaging to them than it was to the Mamluks they were assaulting. The Mamluks, with their crafted bows, were able to engage the Mongols at a greater distance than the Mongol bow would allow, they also moved forward during firing and a Mamluk unit held together under fire. The Mongols in their campaigns in Russia, Persia and Anatolia, had met confederate armies comprised of men not used to fighting with and for each other; the first Mongol assault wave was usually enough to reduce such forces to disorder. The Mamluk core of Kutuz's army, however, was a disciplined body of troops who drilled together daily as regiments. The Mamluk word *khushdashiyya* implies loyalty between 'brothers' who shared the same master but it also meant that these men lived almost in one another's pockets. So after the Mamluks had provoked and drawn in the first Mongol wave they were able to move to a coordinated attack that placed incredible pressure on the Mongols' cyclical pattern of battle. Kutuz's frontal assault on the Mongol first wave required Kit Buqa to launch his

second wave before the first group had done its job. This precluded the resupply and introduction of a remounted Mongol third wave and effectively drew the Mongols into a type of battle – one of charges with lances and sword – that they were not able to win.

Looking at Mongol successes up to Ayn Jalut it is obvious that only an army composed of mounted archers capable of surpassing their rate of fire would ever have had a chance of defeating them, and this is precisely what the Mamluks were, they used almost the same weapon and possessed the same archery skills but to a higher level. The key to their victory over the Mongols in this battle, however, lay in their discipline. At Ayn Jalut there were two charges by the Mamluks under Kutuz and these were organised in the heat of a cavalry battle. To organise such a charge was, in the medieval age, extremely difficult. The charge is only effective if it is timed to strike the enemy at a point where his formation is already breaking up; charging against well-organised ranks was a recipe for disaster. Kutuz's first charge was against a Mongol contingent that was flushed with its success in defeating the Mamluk left wing and was therefore vulnerable to a charge; his second charge was against Kit Buqa's hastily formed counter-attack. Mamluk battlefield communications must have been impressive for the period and Kutuz's abilities as a commander were obviously equally outstanding. However, even given such perfect timing a charge could still be a disaster if executed incorrectly. The charge's shock is dissipated if members of the unit arrive piecemeal. The Normans overcame this problem by withdrawing their knights behind their infantry, to line up before sallying forward. Even this manoeuvre was difficult if the knights were unused to fighting together. The Mamluks at Ayn Jalut had no infantry to cover them while they organised and their charges were organised literally on the hoof and yet they were timed and delivered to maximum effect. The battle was won by what had been instilled on the training ground. We will discuss this training a little later.

As Kutuz was returning to Cairo he was murdered by a group of emirs led by Baybars. Baybars claimed the throne and had Kutuz secretly buried to avoid any tomb becoming a focus of resistance to the new rule. He is however remembered in the writings of Abu Shama:

*The Mongols conquered the land and there came to them*

*From Egypt a Turk, who sacrificed his life.*

*In Syria he destroyed and scattered them.*

*To everything there is a pest of its own kind.*

Baybars knew it was only a question of time before the Mongols would come again into Syria. The defeat of 6,000 Mongols by an Syrian-Mamluk force of 1,400 men at Homs in December 1260 reduced the pressure but Baybars was already building a war machine to defeat the Mongols' Syrian ambitions.

Part of his approach was to neutralise the Crusaders to preclude any Mongol-Crusader alliance that would require him to fight a war on two fronts. Mamluk raids on Antioch brought it close to collapse in 1261 and in 1262 its port was looted. 1263 saw the fall of Nazareth and the encirclement of Acre. Caesarea fell in 1265 as did Haifa and practically all the inland Crusader castles. In 1271 the White Castle of the Templars and Crak des Chevaliers as well as the castles of Gibelcar and Beaufort fell to the Mamluks' siege engines. Christian Armenia was also devastated in 1266.

On the Mongol front Baybars tightened up the border by seizing frontier castles from minor leaders and initiated an offensive scorched-earth policy. The Mamluks made it almost impossible for the Mongols to mass troops on the border as they set fire to pastureland and spoilt water sources that the Mongol cavalry would need during muster to a distance of ten days' march on the Mongol side of the line. Baybars then turned to communications problems. The Mongols' military postal service, the *yam*, provided a model for Baybars's new *barid*, or pony express service. Stations with fresh horses were available all the way from the extreme northeast of Syria down to Alexandria. A network of pigeon towers was also established, new watchtowers complete with smoke signals and beacons were set up along the border and bridges over the Jordan were constructed to aid troop movement within Syria. Baybars also set up an espionage network that even in 1335, fifteen years after peace had been made with the Mongols, was still reporting from Iran.

In an important foreign policy move Baybars concluded agreements with Berke, Khan of the Golden Horde, in 1263. There was still enmity between the two Mongol states, the Ilkhanate and the Horde, and Baybars exploited this to encourage Berke to order all men



who were by clan affiliation part of the Golden Horde but who were in the employment of Hulegu to depart the Ilkhanate either for service with the Mamluks or with the Horde. Further benefits were easing of slave importation to the Sultanate as the Khan's lands included the Qipchaq steppe and the open warfare that erupted between the two Mongol states from 1263 to 1264 which distracted Hulegu from the Syrian front and gave Baybars time to consolidate his defence.

Part of this defence plan was reordering the army. Baybars increased the size of the army during his reign to 40,000 horsemen plus infantry and auxiliaries. The Sultan's Royal Mamluks were the spine of the army and their lives, in theory, prepared them for little apart from war. After being purchased from the slave dealers, the novice Mamluk would be sent to the *tibaq*, the barrack-school in the Cairo citadel. The boys went first to religious teachers. They were taught the Koran and the *sharia*. Then they began training according to the precepts of the *Furusiyya*. The Arabic word *Furusiyya* is made up of three parts – the *'ulum* (science), *funun* (arts) and *adab* (literature) of military skills. The learning was divided into exercises in horsemanship, use of the lance, archery and swordsmanship.

All training was carefully staged, with novices moving slowly from simple 'light' tasks through to highly skilled tasks requiring a great deal of strength and endurance. The boys had handled bows and ridden ponies on the steppe before being 'harvested' but Mamluk training required that every novice started again with the basics – the 'modern' elite forces system of breaking and remaking recruits would have found plaudits among Mamluk instructors. The novice was shown how to make the 'Falcon's Talons' to grip the bow and he then practiced without arrows- great emphasis was placed on correct grip and pull. The novice moved on to a featherless arrow that was shot over and over at almost point-blank range at a cotton-filled leather tube. During this practice, which extended over a considerable length of time, the novice progressed through four bows of increasing pull. The final one had a pull of about thirty kilograms and was the *qaws* used for combat.

The Mamluk trooper would almost always be using his bow from the saddle, so first, of course, he had to *relearn* how to ride. The novice began with a wooden mount and progressed to full armour mounting and dismounting. This drill was then repeated on a

real horse, over and over. Much of the training was based on constant repetition and recapitulation. Mamluk commanders needed their men to be predictable and consistent; if the army and its soldiers are known quantities the field commander can expect manoeuvres to be executed on the battlefield as they are on the training ground.

The highest point of *Furusiyya* training was mounted archery and it would show clearly whether a Mamluk novice had acquired the necessary balance, composure and grace of movement that the instructors sought to instil in him. The two main movements that the horse archer had to demonstrate competency in were shooting down at a sand-filled basket – an infantry kill – and a shot up through a ring mounted high on a beam and into a circular target behind it – a shot into the ranks of an advancing enemy. Both shots were executed at the gallop and the rider stood in the stirrups for both, leaning forward over his horse's ears for the first and hard over to his side for the second. Attainment of one hundred per cent was required if a novice was to achieve the status of *faris* or knight.

The high target was called the *qabaq* and shooting it became a popular sport. Ibn Taghribirdi relates a story of the Sultan al-Ashraf Khalil coming to the *maydan* or hippodrome with friends to shoot *qabaq* in 1293, in the Sultan's tourney a perfectly placed shot would release a dove from a silver gourd atop the pole and the first man to free the bird won the gourd.

The novice was introduced to the lance through the *bunud* exercises. He learnt how to tilt the lance during both attack and retreat and how to parry and disengage from opponents. At the end of his lance training the novice was expected to be able to throw his lance from his galloping mount at a target made up of a tower of seven narrow boxes with a ring on top. The *bunud* was comprised of a total of seventy-two such exercises.

After mastering the lance the novice moved into the *maydan* to learn movement in a unit. The Mamluk tactics employed against the Mongols drew heavily on these skills and Baybars built two more hippodromes to supplement the one built in the reign of al-Salih. By 1277 Baybars's army was ready to take the offensive against the Mongols. Mongol control in Anatolia was not particularly strong and a successful Mamluk occupation would close off one of the Mongols' routes of entry into northern Syria. This said, we cannot be sure that Baybars didn't envisage his Anatolian campaign as little more than a diversionary assault to keep the Mongols distracted from their designs on Syria.

By April 1277 the army was in the Taurus Mountains. From interrogation of captives Baybars learnt that a Mongol army was nearby in the plain of Abulustayn. The Mamluk army entered the plain at its southeast corner whilst the Mongols along with their Turkish and Georgian allies were at the plain's southwest corner.

The Mongol army numbered about 21,000 men whilst Baybars had approximately 14,000 troopers with him. The Mongols opened the battle with their left wing crashing into the Mamluks and actually reaching Baybars's standards. It is difficult to determine from the sources whether this means that they rode at the Mamluk centre, where the standards would normally be, swinging across the battlefield to hit the middle of the Mamluk army at an oblique angle or that the Mamluks were initially disorganised and unready for battle when the Mongols attacked. Either way, Baybars had certainly been caught unprepared for once and realising that if he lost his standards so far from home there would be certain panic among even his most battle-hardened troops he rode with his bodyguard into the fray. The physical shock of his charge was enough to push the Mongols back and to relieve the centre, but by this time the Mamluk left was on the point of caving in under a furious Mongol assault. Baybars sent directions to the army of Hama to bolster the left wing and this was enough to put the battle back in the balance. Baybars was then able to organise a counter-attack. The Mongols were pushed back just as at Ayn Jalut. This time, however the Mongols did not flee the field. They dismounted and many of them fought to the death. The Mamluks almost had to wade through the slaughter on their horses but eventually they had slain enough of their opponents to break their will to continue.

Of course the Mongols were, excepting the Mamluks, the best cavalymen of the age, so why did they dismount at Abulustayn? Returning to what we know of Mongol warfare provides an answer. The following is from John of Plano Carpini:

*If they can avoid it, the Mongols do not like to fight hand to hand but they wound and kill men and horses with their arrows; they only come to close quarters when men and horses have been weakened by arrows.*

The problem was that it was the Mongols who were weakened in the archery exchanges, not the Mamluks. Mamluk 'shower shooting' put down a much higher rate of fire than

that of any other force in the medieval world. The Mamluk archer held several arrows, up to five, by the nock end between his palm and the last three fingers of his bow-drawing hand during firing so he did not reach to his quiver between each shot.

It wasn't however only their rate of fire that failed the Mongols. It was also their mounts. Small steppe ponies cannot carry even lightly armoured troopers at full gallop for a protracted period of time. The reason then for the Mongols dismounting was born of the total exhaustion of their horses, being outclassed in the very kind of warfare in which they excelled and the desperation that this realisation engendered in the weary troopers. Put in its most basic terms, the Mongols were exemplars of the cavalry soldier but the Mamluks of Baybars were its quintessence.

Baybars didn't stay long in Anatolia as he couldn't trust the Turks to support him and his supplies were depleted. The Ilkhan Abagha (Hulegu had died in 1265) was set on following Baybars into Syria. He was dissuaded by a deserter from the Mamluk army, a certain Aybeg, who had been humiliated by Baybars and who now reported to Abagha that the Sultan's army was enormous in size and should not be pursued. Aybeg's desertion and Baybars's treatment of him seems strange given that they were old friends. It is also odd that shortly after Abagha made him governor of Malatya he rather ungratefully emptied the treasury and fled back to Syria. Was he the sting in the tail left behind by the Sultan to complete Abagha's misery?

Baybars died on 1 July 1277 whilst in Damascus. He left his successors a state with secure borders and a powerful well-organised army.

Baybars's son was deposed only two years after his death and the emir Kalavun came to power in 1281 just in time to meet the largest Mongol army ever to enter Syria. It extended across a front of 24 kilometres and its centre and left wing alone had over 50,000 Mongols. The right wing was made up of 10,000 Georgians, Anatolian Turks, Armenians and Hospitaller Knights.

Kalavun had been able to put together an army totalling about 30,000 men from every part of the Sultanate. He had even resorted to using Bedouin. The Mamluk army's line extended beyond that of the Mongols at the expense of a weaker centre. Kalavun's fear was that the Mongols' superior numbers would allow them to outflank him. On the centre left were the Mamluks of Aleppo and on the centre right the armies of Damascus, Hama

and Homs. In the centre Kalavun had a mix of untried and experienced Egyptian Mamluks. The Sultan himself sat just to the rear of the centre on a low rise with the standards, drums and his bodyguard. Kalavun also kept eight hundred Royal Mamluks with him to plug any gaps.

The Mongols advanced to the attack and their right wing had immediate success against the Mamluk left, which broke and scattered. They rolled on to Lake Homs, well south of the main battlefield, and so convinced of victory were the men of this army that they sat down to await news of the left and centre. This was a mistake because things were going rather better for the Mamluks elsewhere on the battlefield.

The Mamluk right had withstood an initial series of Mongol charges and had then moved into a counter-attack. This assault pushed the Mongols of the left wing back onto the Mongol troops in the centre. The Bedouin then added their weight to the attack and this was matched by an advance of the Royal Mamluks in the centre. It is also possible that the Mamluks had employed a technique they trained for almost endlessly; they would search out standard bearers in the Mongol lines and select them for their first arrow strikes during a charge. This may explain the ensuing chaos in the Mongol army. Also, during the Royal Mamluks' thrust, the Mongol commander was injured and fell from his horse. Mongols surrounding him dismounted to secure his safety and this, with memories of Abulustayn still fresh in their minds, stirred the Mamluks to increase their efforts and charge again. The Mongols became one confused mass that struggled to clear the field under the hacking of Mamluk sabres and showers of arrows.

Such was the excitement of the pursuit among the Mamluk forces that Kalavun found himself virtually deserted when the entire Mongol right wing reappeared after suddenly realising during their lakeside sojourn that something was amiss. The Sultan ordered the banners to be furled and the drums to stop and he undoubtedly held his breath, hoping not to be seen with his small force. Eventually the disaster that had occurred dawned on the returning men and they set off to join the Mongol retreat. This retreat cost the Mongols even more in casualties than the battle, as bloody as it had been and soon became a rout.

Abagha spurred on by the failure of 1281 drank himself to death and the Ilkhans who followed him were inept in the extreme until the accession of Ghazan in 1295. The Mongols scored one victory at Wadi al-Khazindar in 1299 but they failed to definitively

destroy the Mamluk field army and the resistance they encountered from the fortified cities of Syria led to the withdrawal of their forces at the end of the campaign season. Their campaigns of 1300 and 1303 met with total disaster and in 1312 their final effort disintegrated during a siege of the Mamluk fortress Rahbat al-Sham.

Formal peace was signed in 1322 and was a tacit acceptance by the Mongols that they couldn't take Syria from the Mamluks because the Mamluks were simply better soldiers than them. The early Sultans were brave intelligent warriors and Baybars was a statesman of the first order who outmanoeuvred the Mongols diplomatically as well as defeating them on the battlefield and frustrating them on the borders. This is not to suggest that the Mamluks were ever likely to destroy the Ilkhanate, their resources were nowhere near sufficient for enterprises of such magnitude. The Mamluks therefore set themselves the limited task of defending and holding onto Syria and thereby Egypt. The technical and strategic reasons for the Mongols' lack of success against the Mamluks have been laid out above but ultimately the reasons for the Mongol failure can be seen in the relief of the siege of al-Bira in 1272, when Kalavun and Baybars swam the river Euphrates leading their men and horses. The Mamluks then charged the Mongols, who, despite superior numbers and the protection of a palisade, could not stop the Knights of Islam with either arrows or the sword. Such feats require leadership, bravery, belief and skill. In short the Mamluks wanted to win more than the Mongols and had both the courage and proficiency to do so.